

## Narrative by Gage Averill

Dear Friends:

With NYU as the approach of ground zero, I thought I should post something to respond to Mark Forry's touching message. First of all, for all of you who have written independently to inquire about us in NYC, my profound thanks.

No NYU students or staff were killed in the attack to the best of the administration's knowledge. However, MANY people had friends and relatives working in the WTC. One of my own students lived across the street from the WTC and saw the first jet enter the building. I came to campus only a couple of minutes before the first attack, vaguely heard the jet roar low over campus (over Washington Square Park—the park with the arch that you see in so many movies) as I went to the Ethno Lab to get ready for my first class (10 am on Tuesday). We are less than a mile from the twin towers. My teaching assistant rushed into the lab to say that the jet had hit the tower. Assuming that this was something the size of a small corporate jet, I headed back to the department where the secretary had just put the radio on, only to hear of the much greater devastation. Students began coming in for my class, and we sat and listened for a while until the announcement that the first tower was collapsing. I then rushed out to the park and joined a crowd of shocked people unable to take our eyes off the developing tragedy. A column of smoke was all that was left of the first tower. People were just reaching the park who had fled the first collapse, covered in grey... sirens were screaming everywhere and the only planes in the sky were air force fighters and police helicopters. A cry went out in the crowd, and I saw that we could distinguish someone throwing himself off a high floor. Then as we watched, the north tower began to collapse in a grey sparkling shower. Everyone screamed: my own was involuntary and I felt my knees buckle. I began to hyperventilate and had to lay across a parked truck.

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I gathered some students from the department and went in search of a hospital to donate blood, but the lines were already around the block, and by the time I was brought to the head of a line because of my blood type, supplies had run out. Having watched the towers fall, however, I knew in my gut that this was partly in vain...that I had watched perhaps 10,000 perish (the figure is now pegged at perhaps half that) and that few would be coming in for transfusions. Other buildings in the area burned, and lower NYC took on a horrible smell that worsened over the next two days.

Still, New Yorkers were amazingly calm and public spirited. Volunteers with hand lettered signs stood in the streets pointing people towards blood donation lines: some went out and bought all the bananas they could find to hand out to people giving blood. Stores set up water and cookie tables in the streets and advertised bathrooms for public use. Everyone talked. Still, so many wandered by with what some have called the “1,000-mile stare.” I got used to it, and found myself falling into it...a far-off look as one wonders how this could happen or how such cruelly devastating acts could be carried out by members of our species.

There was a simple reason that all of the planes were bound for the west coast—the hijackers wanted to make sure that they had as much fuel in the bombs as possible. A colleague of mine in another part of the country said this was a “symbolic act” designed to hit targets of American financial and political might. Unfortunately I disagree. This was intended to kill and maim as many people as possible. It is also quite in keeping with the meticulous planning that the perpetrators of the attack would have known that the fuel fires might be able to collapse the buildings, but only after some time had elapsed (thus killing more fire fighters as well). People may or may not have heard that the attack killed more fire fighters than had died on duty in the history of New York City.

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Many of our students are still without their homes and in temporary spaces, as are some colleagues. My colleague Mercedes Dujunco fortunately has a place in New Jersey as well, because she currently can't get to her apartment south of Houston.

Everyone I know here is thankful for the wonderful support and concern of friends, family, and strangers around the world — and stagger by the everyday heroism of so many around us. NYU has reopened and all classes will be back on schedule this week. But everyone close to this act is also dealing with the aftermath: the stress, sadness, anger, and exhaustion. Indeed, I know that we're not alone in this, as similar reactions have been expressed by people all over the planet. For all of us concerned with global peace, tolerance, and respect, I fear that we're entering a dangerous and incendiary period, but this isn't the time or place for a look ahead.

Love & strength

Gage